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ABSTRACT

There is a persistent belief that, in making dating choices, men are more influenced by physical attractiveness and less influenced by personality characteristics of potential dates than are women. This study was designed to test whether this is true of college students. On the basis of pre-test ratings, a set of nine facial photographs and nine personality descriptions was selected for each sex to represent a wide range of physical and personal attractiveness. Subjects (27 male and 27 female volunteers) were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale how much interest they would have in setting up a "trial date" with each of nine potential partners (picture-description combinations). All possible pairings of the stimuli were used an equal number of times. Subjects also completed the Spence-Helmreich Attitudes Toward Women Scale. Analysis of variance indicated that the subjects' ratings of the potential dates were greatly influenced by the attractiveness of the photographs and of the personality descriptions. No sex differences in response to the photographs' attractiveness emerged, but males were more influenced by the attractiveness of the personality descriptions than were females. A marginally significant interaction suggested that subjects of both sexes with "liberal" scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale were more influenced by the photographs than were subjects with "conservative" scores. (Author)

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Sex Differences in Dating Choices:

The Role of Physical and Personality Attractiveness

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There is a widespread belief in our culture that, in the realm of sexual attraction, males and females choose their partners on different grounds: Males, it is said, are more influenced by the physical attractiveness of potential partners; females are allegedly more sensitive to personality attributes. Bertrand Russell assures as that: "On the whole, women tend to love men for their character, while men tend to love women for their appearance." In Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare has Friar Lawrence exclaim to Romeo: "... young men's love, then, lies/Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes."

Research evidence on whether or not this stereotype is true comes primarily from the literature on the role of physical attractiveness in the dating choices of American college undergraduates. Some studies have simply asked subjects to rate the importance of various factors for their decisions about whom they would like to date. In these questionnaire surveys, males consistently rate the importance of physical attractiveness higher than do females; females, compared to males, report that such personality characteristics as warmth, intelligence, and "compatibility" have a greater effect on their dating choices. The results of these self-report studies, then, seem to support the existence of a sex difference in responsiveness to physical attractiveness and personality of potential dates. But there are many reasons to be skeptical about how closely these stated preferences correspond to

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what individuals actually do.

Another way to approach the question of possible sex differences in dating choices is to examine the relationship between an individual's physical attractiveness and his or her dating popularity. This relationship should be stronger for females than for males if the stereotype is accurate. Several studies have asked students how many dates they have had in the past year, and have correlated this measure with ratings of their physical attractiveness made by a panel of judges. Evidence from these studies does not consistently support the prediction that for females, degree of physical attractiveness is more closely related to dating popularity than for males.

A number of "computer-dating" studies have assessed the physical attractiveness of participants, assigned pairs to go out on a date, and then asked subjects how satisfied they were with their assigned dates. These studies have generally failed to find that the relationship between stated satisfaction and the date's physical attractiveness is closer for males than for females, as the stereotype would predict.

The general picture that emerges from these studies of the importance of physical attractiveness in dating choices is that, when asked directly, males claim that attractiveness is more important to them than do females, but indirect measures of actual behavior do not consistently support this sex difference.

But what about the other half of the sex difference stereotype: Are females more influenced by personality characteristics of potential dates than are males? One way to assess the impact of personality on dating choices is to combine photographs of different levels of attractiveness with trait-terms of varying desirability which supposedly describe the

person pictured, and then ask subjects to rate these "stimulus persons" on desirability as dates. Studies using this method have generally used subjects and/or "stimulus persons" of only one gender, so that opportunities to detect possible sex differences in sensitivity to personality desirability have been quite limited.

In the present study, subjects were asked how much interest they would have in dating each of a series of "stimulus persons": Each potential date was represented by a facial photograph and a paragraph-long personality description. These pictures and descriptions had been pretested to reflect low, moderate, or high levels of physical attractiveness and personality desirability. The major focus of the study was on two questions: Would sex differences in responsiveness to physical attractiveness or personality desirability emerge in this context? How do subjects combine these two sources of information to arrive at an over-all rating of the desirability of the "stimulus persons" as dates? A subsidiary question was whether subjects' attitudes toward sexual equality would relate to their ratings of the "stimulus persons," so we also had subjects fill out the Spence-Helmreich "Attitudes Toward Women Scale."

METHOD

Materials

Personality descriptions. Thirteen paragraph-length personality descriptions were prepared by the investigators. An effort was made to make these descriptions sound realistic, while reflecting a wide range of desirability. Two versions of each description were prepared, both identical except for the use of masculine pronouns in one version, and femi-

nine pronouns in the other. Twelve male and 12 female undergraduates rated the opposite-sex descriptions on a 7-point rating scale headed, "How attractive do you feel this student's personality is?" The 9 descriptions which showed no significant sex differences in mean rating, or in variance of rating were retained for the study. The 3 descriptions with the lowest ratings were designated the Low Desirability descriptions (M=2.28), the middle 3 the Moderate Desirability descriptions (M=3.72), and the 3 highest the High Desirability group (M=4.33).

Photographs. Yearbook portraits (black-and-white) of college undergraduates were selected to reflect a wide range of physical attractiveness. Pictures of Blacks and Orientals and of students who appeared older than their mid-20's were excluded. Twelve male and 12 female subjects rated the opposite-sex set of pictures on a 7-point scale headed, "How physically attractive do you feel this student is? Nine male portraits were matched with 9 female portraits, so that the means and variances of each pair's ratings were virtually identical. As with the personality descriptions, the pictures were grouped for each sex into Low Attractive (M=2.08), Moderately Attractive (M=3.32), and High Attractive (M=4.58) triplets.

Subjects and Procedure

Twenty-seven male and 27 female college students (none of whom were used in the pre-testing phase) were approached in their dormitory rooms and asked to volunteer for the experiment. If the student agreed to participate, he was told that the study dealt with how college students make dating choices. The instructions went on to say that a group of students had been photographed, and brief descriptions of their person-

alities had been prepared, based on interviews with the individuals and their acquaintances and friends. To encourage honesty in the ratings, subjects were assured that their reactions would be completely anonymous, and none of the rated individuals would be informed about how they had been rated.

Subjects were then given the 9 personality descriptions, one at a time, each accompanied by one of the photographs. The pairing of the pictures and descriptions was changed after each subject so that: 1. Each subject rated one pair representing each of the 9 possible combinations of Level of Description Desirability (Low, Moderate, High) and Level of Physical Attractiveness (Low, Moderate, High); and 2. Across all subjects, each picture was paired with each personality description an equal number of times. Subjects rated each "stimulus person" on a 7-point scale headed, "Suppose you were using the services of a dating agency, and all the information they could provide you with were these pictures and descriptions; how interested would you be in setting up a one-time "trial date" with this person?"

When these ratings were completed, subjects filled out a questionnaire designed to probe for suspicion about the purpose of the study or the validity of the personality descriptions, and then completed the Spence-Helmreich "Attitudes Toward Women Scale."

RESULTS

A 2 x 3 x 3 (Subject Sex x Picture Attractiveness Level x Personality Desirability Level) analysis of variance with repeated measures on the last two factors indicated that subjects' ratings of their interest in dating the "stimulus persons" were strongly influenced by both the attractiveness

of the pictures ($p < .001$) and the desirability of the personality descriptions ($p < .001$). The lack of a significant interaction between these two factors ($p < .25$) indicates that subjects were influenced by the attractiveness of the photographs to the same extent regardless of whether they were combined with low, moderate, or high desirability personality descriptions. There was no significant sex difference in response to physical attractiveness level ($p > .25$), but a highly significant Subject Sex x Personality Desirability Level interaction ($p = .01$). Fig. 1 suggests that this interaction arises because females' ratings are more strongly influenced than males' by the desirability level of the personality descriptions. While females rated themselves as equally willing to date "stimulus persons" described as having highly desirable personalities, they were much less willing than males to date individuals with undesirable personalities.

Attitudes Toward Women

To check for possible effects of subjects' attitudes toward sexual equality on the results described above, an additional factor was included in the analysis by dichtomozing (as closely as possible) the male and female subject cells according to their "Attitudes Toward Women Scale" scores. We expected that sex differences in responsiveness to physical attractiveness and personality desirability would be most marked among "conservative" subjects. That is, males with traditional views about sexual equality would be more likely to heavily weight physical attractiveness and ignore personality characteristics than males with liberal views, while "traditional" females would be more likely than "liberal" females to respond stereotypically (i.e., greater responsiveness to personality than to physical attractiveness.) The only effect involving this attitudinal variable to approach significance does not

support this expectation. The Picture Attractiveness x Attitudes Toward Women interaction ($p < .07$) suggests instead that subjects of both sexes with traditional attitudes toward sexual equality were less influenced by physical attractiveness than subjects with more liberal views (Table 1).

FIG. 1

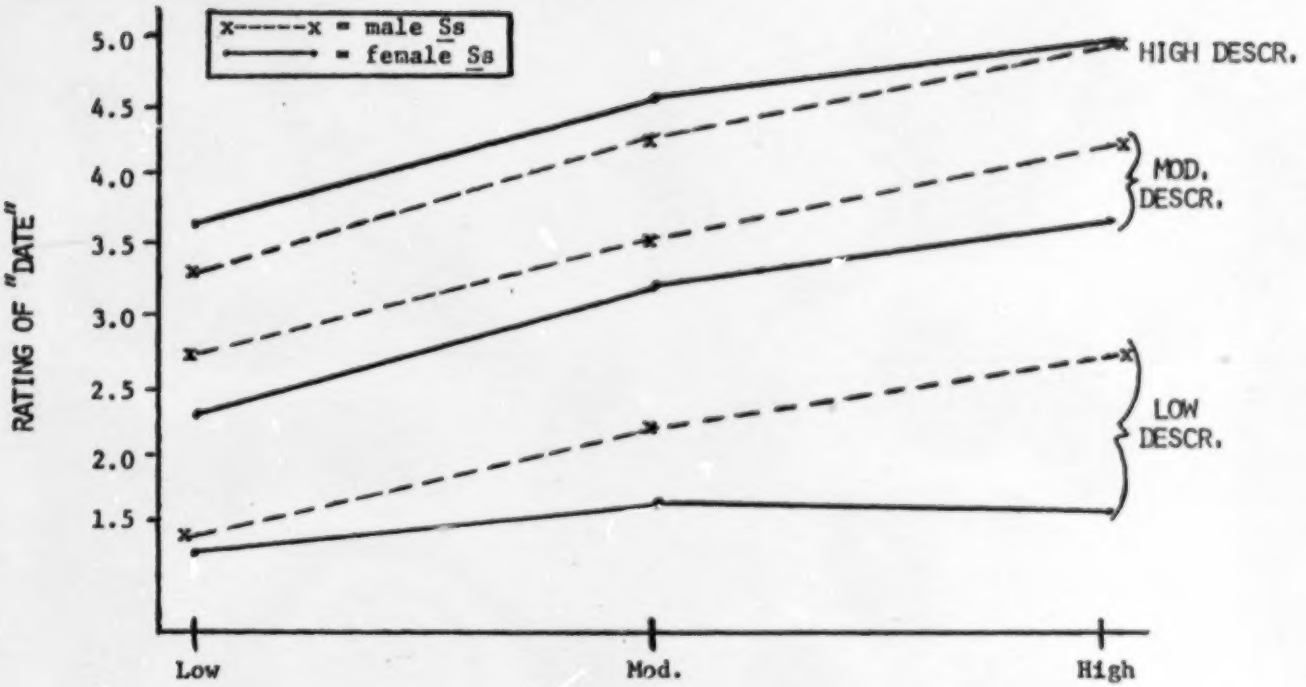

TABLE 1.--Picture Attractiveness X Attitudes Toward Women

Picture Attractiveness	Attitudes Toward Women "Liberal"	"Conserv."
Low	2.35	2.60
Mod.	3.55	3.25
High	3.90	2.60